

SOVIET STRENGTH IN CUBA PUT HIGH

Some Experts Believe Count
May Be 30,000 to 40,000

By HANSON W. BALDWIN

A recent reassessment of Soviet forces in Cuba has convinced some intelligence experts that there may be 30,000 to 40,000 Russian military personnel on the island.

Many experts believe the number has not actually changed greatly since last fall; the upward revision of past figures stems from a close study of all available intelligence facts. The experts believe, too, that the Russians are rotating troops to Cuba, not withdrawing them.

These interpretations provide the background for the recent assertion by Senator Kenneth B. Keating, New York Republican, that Russian strength in Cuba, despite withdrawals announced by the President, was still about 17,000 men.

At a news conference April 3, the President estimated that 4,000 Soviet troops had been withdrawn in recent weeks. He did not estimate the number that remained, but left the impression that about 13,000 were still there.

Capital's Opinions Vary

There is no consensus in Washington about how many Soviet troops are in Cuba. In fact, some of the highest Government officials and many intelligence officers admit that they do not know how many are on the island.

It is far easier to estimate tonnages of equipment and numbers of guns than numbers of personnel. Last fall, emphasis in the intelligence community was fixed on the Soviet medium-range missiles in Cuba and there was a tendency, until after the crisis had passed, to neglect the details of the ground forces and of conventional equipment.

Moreover, it has been possible to estimate approximately the numbers of Soviet troops withdrawn from the island in recent weeks, but not how many have been brought in.

Many officials are convinced that the total number has not changed greatly and that the Russians are replacing the troops they have withdrawn in a rotation plan similar to the United States uses for its overseas units.

Soviet Units Listed

Details are lacking on what some Pentagon officials now call the "Soviet expeditionary force" in Cuba. But some experts believe the Russians are maintaining the equivalent of a heavily reinforced motorized rifle division. Such a division normally numbers about 13,000 men.

The four principal tactical ground units, identified in the past as "battalion-size" units, are still on the island and have made no attempt to conceal their identity.

Other units of field artillery, antiaircraft, infantry, and so on, are said to be somewhat harder to pinpoint, and a large number of the Russian forces are crews for the antiaircraft and coast defense missiles and provide communications, maintenance and specialist services for their own and Cuban forces. An unknown number wear civilian clothes and blend into the population.

Though many intelligence experts and some Government officials say they do not know how many Russian troops are in Cuba, one said he would bet a year's pay that the number was closer to 30,000 than to 17,000, and a month's pay that it was closer to 40,000 than to 17,000.

There appears to be a consensus that no major reduction in Soviet strength has taken place and that the Russians are rotating troops, rather than withdrawing them.

The purposes of the continued presence of so large a Soviet force in Cuba could be multiple.

Various Functions Served

It was undoubtedly intended originally to provide protection for the long-range missiles that Premier Khrushchev attempted to install there last Fall, which have now — in the opinion of most intelligence experts — been withdrawn. Since the withdrawal of all or part of these missiles, the troops appear to have a number of functions:

¶To help protect the island against any invasion by the United States or by exile forces aided by the United States.

¶To perpetuate Premier Fidel Castro's rule and to secure the Communist government there against internal revolt.

¶To train Cuban forces and

other Communist Latin-American cadres.

¶To provide small infiltration and subversion units capable of exporting armed Communism to other areas of the Western Hemisphere.

¶To maintain a base of Soviet, Communist military power in the Western Hemisphere for psychological and political purposes and as a bargaining gambit in the world conflict.

Some experts believe the President may not have known of the revised estimates of some intelligence experts when he implied a few weeks ago that Soviet troop strength in Cuba had been reduced to 13,000.

Some observers have been concerned that official intelligence estimates that have reached some of the highest officials during and since the Cuban crisis may have been shaped — perhaps unconsciously — to conform with policy

rather than evaluating the Russian capabilities baldly.

Cuban Boasts of Strength

HAVANA, April 19 (AP)—

An army leader asserted today that Cuba's military strength in men and arms had increased so heavily that Cuba could fend off 50 invasions like that of two years ago.

The officer, Comdr. Pedro Mirret, called upon the people to make sacrifices so they "may enjoy the revolution's true benefits." He spoke at Playa Giron, the invasion beach on the final day of ceremonies marking the defeat of the Cuban exiles' invasion.